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ABSTRACT

Research on the retention or promotion of failing students has been unable to demonstrate the superiority of either method, concludes the author of this review. Furthermore, research shows that neither method by itself solves the educational problems of low-achieving students, since both retained and promoted students continue to achieve at levels below the class average. Jackson's earlier review of research found that most studies were invalid because they did not control for differences in ability or achievement among failing students. Thus studies comparing students retained or promoted under normal school policies are biased toward promotion policies, says the author, since the students promoted are doing better than those retained anyway. One study attempted to control for ability differences but failed to control for all of them. Research on individual students suggests that some student characteristics can favor retention or promotion, including the student's rate of progress before retention, the amount of lag behind the class, social maturity, and other factors related to the child, the child's family, and school personnel. These research findings imply that meeting the needs of failing students through programs adjusted to students' ability levels is more important than policies of retention or promotion. (Author/RW)

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RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

Each ***Research Action Brief*** reports the findings of significant empirical research studies on a topic in educational management. From these findings implications are drawn for the operation of today's schools, thus serving as a guide for enlightened administrative action.

This ***Research Action Brief*** was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management in cooperation with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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Retain or Promote?

Which is ultimately better for the failing student, retention in the same grade for another year or "social promotion" to the next grade?

This difficult question has bothered educators since the middle of the nineteenth century, when the grading system was first instituted in this country. Yet today, despite the long history, widespread use, and extensive study of grade retention, the issue remains unsettled.

In a multilevel educational system that is geared to the average student at each level, the most popular and apparent remedy for failing students is ingrade retention. Proponents of retention argue that students who do not understand the material at one grade level will find it difficult or impossible to benefit from material at the next level. Retention will give slow or maladjusted students time to come up to grade level and, in so doing, will reduce the range of abilities within each grade. Retention is also seen by many educators as an appropriate remedy for students who are immature for their grade level.

Proponents of social promotion believe that simple grade repetition does no more good for academic achievement than promotion to the next grade. Instead of being given remedial help, says Jackson, repeaters are most often "recycled through a program that was inappropriate for them the first time and that may be equally inappropriate and of less interest to them the second time."

Furthermore, say critics of grade retention, the stigma of flunking is damaging to the social and personal development of low-achieving students, and it starts a snowballing cycle of failure that may extend into adult life. Cook, however, criticizes the notion that social promotion alone will solve the problems of school failure: "If a child fails daily in his school work throughout a year and is then transferred to the next higher grade, where he continues to meet daily failure, it is absurd to assume that anything has been done to restore his confidence in himself and his ability to succeed in educational situations."

As will be shown below, researchers have thus far been unable to demonstrate the superiority of either grade retention or social promotion, mainly because of poorly designed experiments. However, much of this same research unquestionably demonstrates an overriding fact: neither retention nor promotion by itself solves the educational problems of low-achieving students. Most failing students continue to perform far below class average whether they are retained or promoted.

Critical Review of the Research

By far the most valuable publication dealing with the retention-promotion debate is Jackson's 1975 review of the literature on the effects of grade retention. The central but lamentable conclusion of this excellent and comprehensive review is that—despite extensive study of grade retention—most research studies published up to mid-1973 are "quite inadequate for making valid inferences about the effects of grade retention." And despite Jackson's recommendations

for research designs and methodologies that would yield meaningful results, no definitive studies have been published since his review.

In an ideal experiment to test the relative merits of social promotion and grade retention, a large number of low-achieving students from a large and diverse population would be randomly divided into two groups. To further assure that the two groups were as similar as possible, students from one group would be cross-matched with students from the other group according to several achievement, adjustment, and ability indices.

The two more-or-less identical groups would then meet their respective fates—promotion or retention. For several years thereafter and ideally through high school, the academic achievement and social and personal adjustments of each student would be periodically evaluated. Furthermore, the remedial treatments to be given the failing students—if any—would be carefully defined beforehand, and the actual efforts at remediation recorded.

None of the research studies reviewed by Jackson approached this ideal, and only three experimentally assigned students to be either retained or promoted. Unfortunately, the most recent of these studies is forty years old, and all three studied the effects of retention over a period of only one semester. Nevertheless, these studies are the only ones that can be used to directly compare the effects of grade retention and social promotion, for reasons that will become clear.

In the most recent of these studies, Cook followed 312 students in grades one through seven who were scheduled for retention during the next term (the district used a semi-annual promotion system). The students were divided into two groups that were matched with regard to grade level, chronological age, IQ, and reading comprehension. One group was promoted and the other was retained. After one term, no significant differences were found between the groups in either achievement or personality areas.

Cook notes that the gains made by both the failed and the passed groups were small compared to the class average, a result to be expected since both groups came from the bottom 5 percent of each grade. "As far as achievement and personality development are concerned," Cook correctly concludes, "the crucial issue appears to be not whether the slow-learning pupil is passed or failed but how adequately his needs are met wherever he is placed."

The other two studies of this type, published in 1936 and 1929, are similar to Cook's study in both design and conclusions. In the 1936 study, promoted and retained groups attained equal but still low levels of achievement. In the 1929 study, the promoted group was doing better after one term, but the statistical significance of this result is not reported.

Flawed Research

Despite its experimental value, most educators are understandably reluctant to allow low-achieving students to be randomly assigned to promoted and retained groups. A decision this important is preferably made after careful consideration of a number of factors, with the interest of the child foremost in mind.

Perhaps due to this reluctance, most researchers have not utilized the experimental approach discussed above and have instead compared the fates of students retained under normal school policies with those promoted under normal policies. But as Jackson points out, such a comparison "is biased toward indicating that grade promotion has more benefits than grade retention because it compares retained students who are having difficulties with promoted stu-

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dents who usually are not having as severe difficulties, as evidenced by the fact that they have not been retained in grade."

A good example of this bias is found in Chansky's 1964 study. First-grade teachers submitted to their principals lists of low-achieving students who they thought should be retained. After discussion, "children who in the judgment of the principal and the teacher seemed to be good risks were promoted; the poor risks were retained."

After nine months, the promoted group had made "significantly greater improvements in vocabulary and in reading comprehension." But as Chansky himself notes, "the promoted low-achievers had significantly higher mental ages than the retained low achievers" to begin with, and they were also months ahead in achievement areas.

What was the cause of the differences later found between the groups—the retention experience or initial differences in ability between the groups? It is impossible to tell. Yet well over a dozen studies have used this same design, and nearly all have reported promoted students to be doing significantly better than retained students, in accordance with the internal bias of their design.

Some researchers tried to lessen this bias by matching students in the retained group with other low-achieving students who were not retained. In the best-controlled study of this type, Dobbs and Neville matched thirty pairs of students (each pair consisting of a retained first grader and a promoted second grader) according to reading achievement, mental ability, type of classroom assignment, chronological age, race, sex, and socioeconomic status. After the first and second years, both the reading and arithmetic achievement gains of the promoted group were significantly greater than those of the retained group.

Unfortunately, arithmetic achievement was not controlled for initially and, indeed, was significantly greater for the promoted group to begin with. It is quite likely that other differences existed between the groups, and that they influenced both the retention-promotion decision and later outcomes on achievement tests. Nevertheless, the authors concluded that "promotion led to the increased achievement gain of the promoted group."

Unwarranted conclusions such as these are common to most studies of this type, even studies much less controlled than that of Dobbs and Neville. Retention and promotion, though, are not being clearly compared in such studies.

What *can* be concluded with assurance from this and many other studies, however, is that neither grade retention nor social promotion solves the academic difficulties of low-achieving students. Both retained students and their matched but promoted counterparts consistently fail to be "healed" by their respective treatments. Both groups continue to perform far below the class average, even if given a chance to "catch up" for one or more years.

Who Should Be Retained

Most of the studies discussed above compared the average scores of groups of retained and promoted students and gave little attention to the effects of retention and promotion on individual students. Within each group, however, some students made significant gains, some made little or no progress, and others deteriorated in performance or adjustment.

A few researchers have thus concentrated on identifying the characteristics of those students who appear to benefit most from retention. In studies of this type, pupils to be retained are initially characterized and then changes in achievement or socio-personal adjustment are measured after retention.

It should be kept in mind, however, that studies of this type do not compare the effects of retention and promotion. There is nothing in them that indicates that the students who did well when retained would not have done as well or better had they been promoted.

Stringer examined fifty cases of retention in grades one through eight to determine what factors would predict improvement in the retained year. The most significant criterion found was the rate of progress in the year before retention. Eight students were achieving at or greater than the normal rate in the year before retention. During the year of retention, however, all these students posted losses, the average decline being 70 percent of a grade level. In contrast, of twenty-five students who were achieving at less than half the normal rate in the year before retention, twenty-three showed gains during the year of retention that averaged about 75 percent of a grade level.

Stringer speculates that students "tended to see as just (or helpful?) a retention that confirmed their own perception, and as unjust (or spiteful?) a retention that ignored their actual accomplishment." In reaction, they responded positively to a deserved retention and negatively to an undeserved retention.

Another criterion that helped identify successful retainees was the amount of lag that existed at the time of retention. More students gained from retention and less lost from it when the lag was from one to two years below grade level. When the lag was either less than one year or greater than two years, more students posted losses and their losses were greater.

Reinherz and Griffin followed fifty-seven boys of normal intelligence who were repeating for the first time in grades one through three. They found that "a large proportion of children characterized as 'immature' made 'satisfactory achievement' during the retained year compared to children with less evidence of immaturity." Over 80 percent of the first graders made satisfactory achievement, whereas less than half of the second and third graders made equivalent progress. Children with good or excellent peer relations and children with good or excellent social and emotional adjustment also made significant progress. These findings support the beliefs of many educators, conclude the authors, that retention is most useful for normal but immature students in the early grades.

Recently, two publications have appeared that are designed to help educators decide between promotion and retention for individual students. Lieberman's "decision-making model for in-grade retention" is simply a list of factors that should be considered before making a decision to retain or promote. The factors are not weighted, says Lieberman, because "it is the individual student who must

give weight to the factors."

Included are child factors, such as physical size, maturity, grade placement, age, self-concept, and child's attitude toward promotion; family factors, such as transiency, language spoken in the home, and age of siblings; and school factors, such as the attitudes of principal and teacher toward retention, and availability of personnel and special education services. Lieberman discusses each factor and identifies several "rules of thumb."

"Light's Retention Scale" is quite similar to Lieberman's list except that each of nineteen factors is scored and a composite total is computed. The final score is to be used as a guideline only, Light emphasizes.

Each factor was included "when research was available for guidance," and the possible scores for each factor were "assigned subjectively after a careful analysis of research pertaining to the question." Although Light discusses the justification for each factor, the research support he alludes to is rarely apparent. Nevertheless, the scale is valuable for stimulating thought about the multitude of factors that must be weighed before a retention decision is made.

Implications

What, then, should teachers and administrators do when faced with the problem of failing students? As Jackson notes, "the accumulated research evidence is so poor that valid inferences cannot be drawn concerning the relative benefits" of retention and promotion. What *is* clear, however, is that the learning problems of most failing students are not solved by a promotion policy alone, whether it favors retention or promotion.

The most important concern, then, is not which grade failing students are placed in, but whether their needs are met wherever they are placed. If these special needs are to be met, Cook observed forty years ago, "the formal textbook-assignment-recitation procedure will have to be discarded."

Alternatives to retention and promotion have been suggested by many researchers. Reinherz and Griffin propose "transitional maturity" classes for children between kindergarten and first grade who aren't yet ready for academic learning. "Such a procedure as well as ungraded classes," they state, "would cut the educational bed of Procrustes to fit the child, not cut the child to fit the bed."

Dobbs and Neville note that low-achievers continue to experience failure whether promoted or retained "unless classroom activities are adjusted to the ability level of the individual child." They suggest systems of continuous progress, ungraded classes, ability grouping, remedial instruction, and smaller classes with more individual instruction.

In schools where these kinds of options have not yet been developed, educators can use the small amount of research and the decision-making instruments discussed earlier to determine which students might benefit most from retention. Using this information and a large dose of good judgment, teachers and administrators can carefully decide whether retention or promotion will better serve the total development of each child. It is clear, though, that unless real efforts are made to adjust the present system to the special needs of low-achieving students, both social promotion and grade retention will continue to exacerbate these students' failings.

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